

the room seemed to be the darker for her going. Rivers took up his position on the hearthrug, looking down into the fire. His eye caught sight of the broken china. He stopped and picked up the tiny severed rose.

"Rather a pity. Always admired those little candlesticks. How did it happen?"

"Virginia is so impulsive," Eleanor composedly went on stitching beads, "it was partly accident, I suppose."

The man's face darkened a little. It seemed to him that Miss Downes rarely made a remark concerning her cousin's wife which did not contain some unpleasant inflection.

"Accidents will happen to the most careful of us," he remarked sentimentally sitting down in the place vacated by Virginia.

He had no active dislike for Miss Downes, indeed she encouraged his visits there, but something about her tonight made him wish that she would find it necessary to leave him to his own society.

"And what was the problem Mrs. Arbuthnot spoke about?"

Eleanor laid down her work for a moment.

"Virginia is too absurd for anything. It was no problem. I simply argued that the majority of men marry one woman loving another, and that it was not surprising that Jim should be among the number."

RIVERS looked up, incredulity on his florid, good-natured face.

"But surely you did not tell her that?"

"She brought it on herself," Eleanor spoke with all the obstinacy of a narrow, embittered nature. "She insisted on asking me whether Jim had loved any other woman. We all know that he married her solely to oblige her father."

Rivers rose to his feet and looked down at the speaker in bewilderment.

"And you told her that, too? By Jove, how women can rub it into one another. I never heard that Arbuthnot loved—" he broke off—"but then I was years in India, away from everything over here. Jim might have been in another world for all I knew of his doings or he of mine. But to tell her—!"

He subsided into momentary silence. Then broke out again.

"Poor old Jim, a chap to get it badly when once he succumbed. He's not of the order that changes, is Jim. What a tragedy can be consummated by a dying man."

"Why was Jim such a fool as to agree to marry her? A silly little school girl without a word to say for herself. When he might—"

The speaker's cold grey eyes burned with sudden fury. Rivers, looking at her, guessed her secret.

He turned his glance away from her and fingered the tiny china rose as it lay on the mantel shelf.

"Mrs. Arbuthnot must have been charming always," he said rather ill-advisedly, "and it is uncommonly hard on her if she has been under a misapprehension."

"Why should she be pitied? She has her youth, her looks—oh, yes, I know she is lovelly—her charm of manner, her capacity for turning men's heads. It is only common justice that something should be withheld from her, something her vanity desires."

"And that?"

"Jim's love," the string of beads fell shimmering through her fingers, as she repeated in a lower tone, "Jim's love!"

The man listening felt a sudden throb of sympathy. He, too, had an uncomfortable ache at the heart.

The maid entered, bringing in some letters on a salver. He was glad of the interruption. Miss Downes sorted the little pile. Several addressed to Virginia she tossed on the table, the others she gathered in her lap. He noticed that one in a large square envelope she placed, with no sign of haste, in a satin bag hanging by her side.

"Will you excuse me?" she said then, "I see there is a letter from Jim marked urgent."

"By all means." He rose and helped himself to a newspaper while she read the closely written pages.

Virginia only exceeded her thirty minutes by ten. She entered, a radiant vision in soft pink, her evening cloak on her arm. At the sight of her his heartstrings tightened. Jim must be made of iron to resist her.

"A new frock in honor of the occasion," she said gaily, then looked over her shoulder with a worried frown. "Eleanor, do you think the skirt—" she broke off, her expression on the in-

stant becoming vivid, expectant. "The mail is in, any letters for me?"

She bent over the table, turning away with a disappointed face. "Nothing from Jim."

"I have a letter from Jim," Eleanor went on reading the second sheet. "He speaks of a hasty trip to England. Would you like to read it?"

Virginia, a stormy light in her eyes, turned from the proffered sheet.

"No, thank you; it will keep until I get back. Please ring, Major Rivers, and they can whistle for a cab. How late it is."

AS he put her cloak round her shoulders he realized that she was trembling. A sudden fury took possession of him. What right had Jim to give the other woman the preference of a letter.

But in the cab and later at the restaurant Virginia's spirits returned. Her gaiety may have

change in his manner which escaped her. "We will get it over quickly and then—Come along."

She submitted. All her gaiety had vanished. She seemed very young as she gave him her hand and descended. Her uncovered hair caught the light from the softly shaded lamps as they passed along the room to a table. Every head turned in her direction and he heard a woman's voice murmur, "What a lovely face, but so sad."

They had a table to themselves in the alcove of a window. They might almost have been alone. Neither made more than a pretense at eating. Her thoughts were miles away, his never strayed beyond her.

Suddenly she leaned across to him.

"We have been good friends for a long time now, haven't we? So good that you won't mind if I tell you something of my plans for the future?"

His pulses quickened. His hand under the shelter of the tablecloth was hard clenched. It was evident that she never guessed what his feelings were. There was something so fresh, so unsophisticated about her in spite of her woman of the world air.

"Tell me."

His voice was low and husky with restraint, but she was too absorbed in her own thoughts to heed.

"THERE'S no one else to talk to," she went on with the unconscious cruelty of a child, "no one, not a soul."

"Tell me," he repeated.

"You heard what she said about a hasty trip to England? There was not a line to me. After all I am his wife and she only his cousin. This is the second mail he has written to her about his plans, ignoring me. I will not have it. I have endured it and might go on enduring it, perhaps, so long as he stayed away and did not guess how it hurts," her low voice broke off for an instant, "but if he comes back I will not stay to be thrust into the second place. He does not care for me. He married me, she says, solely to ease my father's anxiety. If I go away, surely in time he can marry the woman he loves. I am afraid to meet him, since I know what Eleanor told me, and he may come any day. You see," she gave a low bitter laugh, "I do not even know the date of his arrival home. I longed to snatch the letter from her hand, but my pride would not let me. Would yours in my place?"

He shook his head. His face had stiffened into hard lines; she was trying him beyond his strength.

"I will go away—disappear," she broke her roll into fragments on the tablecloth, "he shall marry—the—the other woman."

Her very childishness touched him inexpressibly. He looked across at

her.

"But if you go away—just you yourself—it will not free him; how could it?"

"He will imagine I am dead."

A touch of anger crossed his face. He leaned closer.

"Think of the horrible loneliness always, if you go by yourself. Child, you do not realize what your life would be."

She shrank a little as under cover of the music and laughter he put out his hand and touched hers, drawing it away again instantly.

"Virginia, I love you. Come with me. I will be good to you always. We will go abroad, tonight if you like—there is time—and then he will be free to marry the other woman."

She leaned her arm on the tablecloth, looking at him with piteous inconsistency.

"But I don't want him to be able to marry her. And yet how terrible it must have been for him to marry me. Jim would not change, would he? Don't you remember his eyes? His mouth? They were always so steadfast. I'd like him to be happy through me."

She looked out at the starlit sky. The moon slowly rising over the housetops showed the river silver bright.

A long sigh escaped her. She turned her head slowly and looked at him.

He rose to his feet without a word and beckoned to the waiter. They went out to the vestibule and he helped her into a cab, followed her when he had given directions to the driver. She shrank into her corner hardly comprehending. He held himself well in check. She was like a fluttering bird; he must be very gentle with her. They were out of the traffic now, speeding up a silent street. Suddenly a sob escaped her. She took his

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"Eleanor, tell me. Did Jim love anyone else when he was forced into marrying me?"

been the least degree overstrained, but it was delightful enough to make of her a charming companion.

Men are easily deceived. Rivers came to the conclusion that Jim was of as little moment to her as she to Jim. It was not to be wondered at if his head swam at her proximity, if he thrilled at the touch of her little gloved hand, at the perfume of her hair as she sat beside him. She was lovely enough to turn any man's head. And as if fate meant to be kind all through, the play contributed to make the mental atmosphere more electric. It was almost their own case point for point.

Virginia's eyes grew more absorbed; her face was very pale. She had slipped off one glove and had forgotten to put it on again. The exquisite arm was bare from shoulder to wrist, her hand with the wedding ring upon it lay, palm upwards, on her knee. There was a look of helpless appeal about that hand which attracted Rivers' attention far more than the play. She watched the stage, but he watched her and the little defenseless hand curved upward like that of a child asleep.

As the play proceeded Virginia's interest became more vivid. It was almost as if something vital depended upon it, as if a decision that concerned her hung upon the issue. When the curtain went down she drew a long breath. He could hear it above the plaudits of the house. She made no movement when the curtain went up again, merely sitting there until she noticed that he waited to help her on with her cloak. She got into the cab mechanically, never noticing the directions he gave.

Then as it stopped at a brightly lighted restaurant she drew back and frowned a little.

"I would far rather go straight home, I feel so desperately tired."

"But we always finish up with some supper," he remonstrated gently enough; there was a little